DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 998 CS 214 178

AUTHOR Dawkins, John
TITLE How Good Writers Punctuate.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 36p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Punctuation; Sentence Structure; Theories; *Writing Improvement; Writing Processes; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Stylistics; Writing Style

ABSTRACT

The punctuation system presented in this paper has explanatory power insofar as it explains how good writers punctuate. The paper notes that good writers have learned, through reading, the differences among a hierarchy of marks and acquired a sense of independent clauses that allows them to use the hierarchy, along with a reader-sensitive notion of clarity, to punctuate single independent clauses and conjoined independent clauses according to their semantic intentions. Because it is principle-based (with four rules), the system in the paper tolerates variations according to the writer's semantic intent (meaning)--that is, according to her or his determination of the needs of clarity. The system presented accounts for both the early punctuation of Isak Dinesen, which shows a nonnative speaker unsure of the system, and her later works which show her in control of the system. The system also accounts for the style of James Joyce in "Dubliners" and for John Updike's conservative punctuation in nonfiction but liberal punctuation in fiction. The system presented in the paper focuses on what "good" writers do and suggests how others can do the same. By allowing options according to the need for clarity, the system encourages careful analysis and rewriting--what good writers have learned to do. Three tables representing aspects of the system of punctuation are included. (Contains 19 references.) (RS)

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John Dawkins
14 Spring Lane
Yardley, PA 19067

1994

HOW GOOD WRITERS PUNCTUATE *

6670 words

* I need to thank Jim Sledd (Professor Emeritus, University of Texas) for pointing out problems in the manuscript, big ones as well as little ones. Those that remain are there because of me, of course, not him.

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HOW GOOD WRITERS PUNCTUATE

Introduction

Functional Punctuation marks originally served the elocutionary needs of a reader by emphasizing prosodic considerations (Brown 1050, Little 69-70). But with the printing press and widespread distribution of reading material, the marks came to serve the needs of the silent reader by emphasizing grammatical and semantic considerations. And in the 17th century, following publication of the earliest grammars, "syntactical punctuation" developed (Brown 1050-1051). Even so, intent to represent intonation in writing has never been abandoned (Chafe 397-400); indeed, concern for the "prosody of speech" was, perhaps, the main reason for the "heavy" punctuation of the 18th and 19th centuries (Chafe 416). But the 20th century has clearly moved in the direction of "light" punctuation (Little 76); no longer do we use commas with practically every subordinate element and separable phrase (Brown 1051) or between a lengthy subject and its verb (Quirk et al. 1619). Intonation is given little attention in the rules of current handbooks and style manuals. We find grammatical statements attended by semantic considerations but rarely by reference to intonation; for example, of the 18 rules for commas in The American Heritage Dictionary, Second

College Edition, only one adds a reference to the sounds of speech (58-59).

Nevertheless, interest in the correspondences between punctuation and intonation remained and, around midcentury, even gained new impetus in the writings of structural linguists; for example, see W. Nelson Francis (469-476) who emphasized the relationship, admittedly imperfect, between the functional marks (three sentence-final marks, semicolon, colon, dash, comma) and the intonations of speech; perhaps the most complete statement of this kind is found in Merriam-Webster's 1961 **New International Dictionary**, third edition (48-50).

Although these linguistic analyses are given little attention in the punctuation rules in English handbooks (of the education industry) or style manuals (of the publishing industry), serious interest in prosody and punctuation continues today in the minds of readers as well as scholars. The research of Robert J. Scholes and Brenda J. Willis indicates "that many university students (evidence) belief in the elocutionary purpose of punctuation" (17); Wallace Chafe's research identifies syntactic points where a heard boundary ... must be suppressed because of a punctuation rule" as well as points where "punctuation is inserted by a rule but no segmentation is heard ..." (424). Because his evidence suggests that concern for the prosody of speech is important in writing, Chafe concludes that writers of rules as well as students can help resolve their uncertainties

through an awareness of such conflicts--and suggests, for example, that we relax the proscription of the comma between a lengthy subject and its verb. And two recent scholars, Charles F. Meyer and Joan Persily Levinson, different though their approaches may be, recognize prosody as an important factor in modern punctuation practice.

Meanwhile, we have had good counsel on punctuation from, for example, C. V. Carey and Eric Partridge in England, and Joseph Williams and Harry Shaw in the United States. But these writers do not provide "descriptive" studies of punctuation practices--only more sophisticated interpretations of the rules in handbooks and style manuals. They do not, then, mark an advance in either theory or research. Another difference between all of these approaches to punctuation and the one on the following pages must be noted: for the practitioner, they are all, like the handbooks and style manuals, grammar dependent (to understand them, one must have book knowledge of English grammar); the theory to be presented, on the other hand, is "meaning" dependent (to understand it, one who has a native speaker's knowledge of English grammar need know only her or his intended meaning). Before continuing, however, there is need to discuss two major contributions to a growing understanding of punctuation--the studies of Charles F. Meyer, A Linguistic Study of American Punctuation, and Joan Persily Levinson, Punctuation and the Orthographic Sentence.

Meyer

Charles F. Meyer's A Linguistic Study of American Punctuation is an analysis of the punctuation found in a large corpus of American writing. His system, which recognizes the input of syntax, semantics, and prosody, accepts the "rules" in current style manuals (Appendix 1) and interprets them in light of eight "principles" that guide or delimit or describe (one wonders which term is appropriate) the choices among the rules (chapter 7). Some choices are "common," and others are "uncommon." For example, with "sentence-initial adverbs," the common choice is a comma; the uncommon, a dash (see Table 7.1, 117). As a description, this is clear enough. But with more choices, as in "non-elliptical coordinate clauses" or "juxtaposed main clauses," it is noteworthy that Meyer's approach provides no guidance among the choices. (In addition, I must note, his discussion of the "non-elliptical coordinate clauses" and "juxtaposed main clauses" neglects important choices--colon, dash, and period.) The discussion of style leads to more uncertainty, for stylistic effects are obtained by violating the established norms (rules). We suppose (but are not told) that choosing the uncommon mark creates a stylistic effect, and that choosing a mark not specified by the rules creates a more prominent stylistic effect. But the latter choice is sometimes just" wrong"; we would like more principle for choosing than the simple instruction to violate a norm.

A critical problem for Meyer is his corpus, which consists of "journalism," "learned writing," and "fiction"--all chosen from Kuchera and Francis, Standard Corpus of Present-Day Edited English (see Preface). By examining these as if they formed one kind of writing ("American"), he fails to recognize differences among genres. Indeed, his own examples illustrate that it is fiction that contains the vast majority of violations, indicating differences among genres that one would like a theory to account for. Furthermore, the journalism category contains unrecognized genres that reflect different punctuation practices. Sports columnists and feature writers who develop a distinct identity (like Mike Royko) apparently produce as many violations as do writers of fiction. (Consider also the "literary" writers to be discussed in these pages--that is, the writers of personal essays found in college readers.) There are, then, varieties of punctuation that are reflective of different genres as well as varieties that are reflective of different writers. To describe such a mixed bag of genres and writers as if the description is of one thing ("American punctuation") is to blur the picture and to neglect the concept of stylistic difference.

Another question concerns Meyer's acceptance of the norms (rules) of the publishing industry. These norms reflect, of course, established conventions and presumably provide a base for analyzing what writers do. But when the work of the writer under study has undergone remediation by

those who determine the norm, the result is more a study of the norm-setters than the writers. The fact is that the publishers of the materials in the corpus (The New York Times, university presses, Simon and Schuster, and so on--see Appendix 2) grant control of punctuation to their copy editors, who pride themselves on their ability to apply the rules of style manuals. Hence the reason for the appearance of many more violations in fiction, a genre that publishers allow--within limits--to go its own way in matters of usage, style, and punctuation. (Another genre granted this privilege is the personal essay--it is a privilege, then, that seems to be granted to "literary" writers, or perhaps just to those who have the power to demand it.)

Still another problem is the complexity of the theory; it is not a system that many of us could use with a composition class. It is not, I propose, even as a description, an accurate picture of the punctuation of even the writers of journalistic or "learned" prose in its unedited forms. How many writers found in our multitude of journals know enough book grammar to apply the rules of style manuals (let alone Meyer's principles)? How many would have the interest to learn them? The question is even relevant for literary writers, most of whom, I think, would show not so much a lack of interest in the rules as a disdain for them. (Consider E. B. White's indifference to the caveats in Strunk and White.)

Finally, as discussions of linguistic theories put it: a

good theory must have an overall simplicity and an explanatory power. Meyer's theory might be practiced by devoted students of the written language, but its 53 rules and eight principles, all of which are dependent on grammatical-semantic-phonological knowledge, are far too complex for most of us in the profession, let alone our students. Second, the theory fails in essential ways to explain how human beings who happen to be good writers (but don't follow either style manuals or Meyer's principles) punctuate their texts quite well--indeed, I argue, better than copy editors could do it. So A Linguistic Study of American Punctuation, though of much interest, does not meet the requirements of a good theory.

Levinson

Meyer assumes the adequacy of the conventions in style manuals as a basis for developing principles and rules that describe modern American punctuation. Levinson's study, on the other hand, is diachronic and synchronic, an approach that uncovers more-than-adequate evidence to support the claim that conventional definitions of the sentence are inadequate for the analysis of sentence punctuation. Her "research demonstrates that the signs that demarcate 'sentence' did not exist at least up till 1500, and even thereafter, and that the sentence as a unit of writing was not developed before the spread of printing"(9). Indeed, meaning- and grammar-based definitions of the sentence fail

in too many cases to identify and therefore to demarcate what at any time in our records of writing we find between a capital and its accompanying period. Thus Levinson proposes an orthographic sentence whose basic constituents are the "proper clause" and accompanying "sentence partials," constituents that produce "information groupings." So a sentence is an information grouping, "some of which are 'correct,' and some of which would be considered grammatically incorrect, but are informationally right," as she puts it in 1989 (117).

The concept "information grouping" gives Levinson a structure that, unlike "sentence," can account for all varieties of material found betwen the capital and accompanying period. The availability of punctuation to mark off information groups and prosodic effects is what "brings punctuation out of the grammar and into a much more tenuous domain, where meaning and style meet, where perhaps style is meaning" (154-155).

The basic similarity between Levinson's work and the theory to be presented here is the rejection of the "sentence" as a unit of analysis. Although it has grammatical requirements, the sentence is not grammatically determined. Her proper clause is identical with my "independent clause" and her sentence partials are, apparently, identical with my "attachments." We both see the sentence as the result of a writer's choice among punctuation options.

But there is a basic difference between Levinson and me:

her approach is product-oriented (describing an existing corpus); mine is process-oriented (hypothesizing a theory of how orthographic sentences get punctuated). She is intent on analyzing existing structures; I am intent on identifying processes used during "good" writing behavior. Her approach can be questioned in terms of adequacy of evidence and the claims derived therefrom; mine can be questioned in terms of its power to explain writing behavior and, consequently, of its pedagogical usefulness.

Theory

Halliday et al. tell us that the scientific method consists of five steps: observing linguistic events, generalizing on partial likenesses, hypothesizing to account for the events, theorizing hos language works, and testing for the theory (Halliday et al. 210), which would lead to confirmation, revision, or rejection.

The theory in this paper has followed that course of development and can be tested for its adequacy as an account of linguistic events; in fact, it can be tested for its adequacy as an instructional theory of how to punctuate. The theory behind the style manuals and handbooks, on the other hand, is represented by an arbitrary set of unordered rules. The arbitrariness in their order and number indicates a theoretical weakness, but the major weakness is a failure to account for punctuation practices: Good writers do not always follow the rules, good writers may follow a rule in one sentence only to disregard it in another, good writers do not

regularly agree among themselves. (For more evidence of these phenomena, see Dawkins.)

What Is To Be Accounted For

This paper proposes a theory of punctuation that claims to be simple (in that it can be taught, in some form, at any educational level) yet adequate (in that it explains the practices of good writers [1], accounting for the varieties and differences that Meyer does not). By implication, also, the paper claims that the rules in our handbooks are confusing, harmful, even--in essential ways--wrong.

It is well known that the punctuation rules in handbooks and style manuals are not sacred texts for a great many good modern writers. Fragments and comma splices, violations of the coordinate clause and elliptical coordinate clause rules for commas, and inconsistencies in the use of a comma with introductory word, phrase, and clause--these and other failures to follow the rules are frequent enough to raise questions about the rules themselves. Quirk et al., in A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, examine statistical data on the use of the comma to mark coordination and conclude: "These results show we are dealing with tendencies which, while clear enough, are by no means rules. In such cases, it is probable that the general truth that punctuation conforms to grammatical rather than rhetorical considerations is in fact overridden" (1060).

Moreover, handbook rules provide no instruction for use of the comma in the following:

(1) Slowly, he walked to the store.

(2) He walked, slowly, to the store.

(3) He walked to the store, slowly.

And when we produce a sequence of three or more independent clauses, punctuation questions often cross sentence (or independent clause) boundaries, and handbooks do not offer help for such interdependent punctuation problems. Consider a sequence of three simple independent clauses:

it caught my eye -- I swiveled around -- and the next instant, inexplicably, I was looking down at a weasel--

There weren't any handbook rules to tell Annie Dillard to use a semicolon rather than a period or a dash or a colon or a comma splice between the first two; or to follow that with a dash rather than a comma or a period or, yes, a colon between the last two.

Sentences and Independent Clauses

It can be argued that all discourse , written or spoken, consists of independent clauses or underlying independent clauses. The principle for "underlying" structures is well known: In spite of the missing element(s) in the surface structure, a clause is independent if the missing element(s) can be readily provided by a native speaker:

(4) Where are you going? Home.

(5) Mary read the book. John too.

(6) We went to the beach. Enjoyed the sun.

I repeat: Discourse consists of independent clauses, not sentences. Sentences are but one way of punctuating

independent clauses:

(7) First it was rain. Then it was snow.

(8) First it was rain; then it was snow.

(9) First it was rain, then snow.

And so on--there are a number of other options for marking this boundary between independent clauses.

Furthermore, all sentences consist of either one independent clause (with or without attachments) or multiple independent clauses (with or without attachments). So consider, first, punctuating the single independent clause. There are only three possibilities for attachments:

I. ... (pct?) someone will pass the test. (yes or no)

II. Someone will pass the test (pct?) ... (yes or no)

III. Someone (pct?) ... (pct?) will pass the test. (2 marks or none, yes or no?)

And the question for all three patterns is whether the mark(s) make the intended meaning clearer.

And how does one decide? According to anyone's principle of good writing: saying what you mean; in a word, clarity. The principle is a general one. All writers, evidently, want to say what they intend. It is the same principle that guides choices among word and syntactic options--a writer's style is a matter of choosing among the many options in order to produce an intended meaning. Being clear is saying what you mean.

As the punctuation hierarchy indicates (see p. 16), other marks besides the comma are possible in these patterns,

and three simple "rules" dictate their availability:

Rule 1: Only zero, comma, or dash permissible in pattern I.

Rule 2: All functional marks [3] permissible in pattern II.

Rule 3: Only paired marks (commas, dashes, zeroes, parentheses) permissible in pattern III.

An example for each rule:

(10) Surely (zero, comma, dash) the kid will come clean.

(11) The kid will come clean (any mark) and go home for a good night's sleep.

(12) The kid (zero, comma, dash,) who has a guilty conscience (zero, comma, dash,--paired with the first) will come clean.

In ordinary contexts, one would expect:

(13) Today John went to school.

But one can easily create a context (John having been hospitalized for a year) in which the need suggests:

(14) Today, John went to school.

The non-independent clause element in pattern I might, of course, be greatly expanded:

(15) When John ran to school on that morning in January and even as he passesd through the doorway that beckoned like a portal to the halls of fame ....

But the principle is the same: clarity.

It is important to realize that the nature of the problem for the student is essentially simple, even though the answer may not be. So instruction consists of providing

enough examples for discussion (numerous in college readers, of course) and enough opportunities in writing to develop the experience needed for good judgment. In providing these opportunities the teacher will realize one of the strengths of the system: it encourages students to analyze their semantic and rhetorical intentions. The student doesn't try to match his or her sentence with a rule in the handbook, then respond in a behavioral sense; instead, the student reads and considers her or his intentions and the reader's needs, basing the decision on considerations of clarity. We like to say, in our interpretations of the writing process, that writing is thinking. Indeed! In contrast to the rule-matching process required by a handbook, this approach to punctuating is an expression of the writing-thinking premise, for it provides the occasion and the tools for thinking.

For pattern II the problem is the same--does one want to mark a separation at the boundary or not? And the principle that guides the decision maker is still the need to make intended meaning clear:

(16) John wanted the money (pct?) which he was owed.

(17) John wanted the money (pct?) which was normal for him.

(18) John wanted the money (pct?) thinking he'd take Mary to dinner.

(19) John wanted the money (pct?) even though he hadn't earned it.

For pattern III, the problem is different only in that the choice is "two marks or none":

(20) The student {pct?} who was too sick to play {pct} watched on TV.

(21) The candidate {pct?} deemed unfit for public office {pct?} won 70% of the vote.

(Insertions in Pattern III can, of course, occur elsewhere, not only between subject and predicate.)

Raising and Lowering

Within an independent clause, the principal and basic marks are zero and comma (see table 3):

(22) John asked for a date when he got the nerve.

(23) John asked for a date, when he got the nerve.

The comma gains some emphasis for the attachment. And, because of the nature of the hierarchy, the higher the mark the greater the emphasis:

(24) John asked for a date--when he got the nerve.

(25) John asked for a date. When he got the nerve.

Thus, justification for the sentence fragment.

Pressure to use a mark higher in the hierarchy I am calling "raising." It develops naturally when commas within a sentence boundary mark different degrees of separation; thus the sentence can be made more clear by using a higher mark at the major boundary. In the following sentence by Baldwin, the pressure for raising occurs where Baldwin used the semicolons:

(26) I don't think the Negro problem in America can be even discussed coherently without bearing in mind its

context; its context being the history, traditions, customs, the moral assumptions and preoccupations of the country; in short, the general social fabric.

Some writers might have resisted the pressure for the first semicolon and stayed with a comma; most, I think, would have used a dash instead of the second semicolon. In either case, the sentence illustrates conditions for "raising."

Raising, obviously, calls attention to itself, and thus gains emphasis. And it is this emphasis that Frost evidently felt a need for in the next example:

(27) I once heard of a minister who turned his daughter--his poetry-writing daughter--out on the street to earn a living, because he said there should be no more books written....

Raising is a device for gaining rhetorical effect as well as clarity. In (28) Alice Walker uses a comma instead of zero to gain emphasis; and in (29) Ellen Goodman chooses an even higher mark to gain even more emphasis:

(28) White men and women continued to run things, badly.

(29) Date rape, after all, occurs in a context, a culture that--still--expects men to be assertive and women to be resisant.

And why does Dillard want commas in the next example?

(30) I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go.

Pressure for raising accounts for two rules in our

handbooks--a semicolon rule and a dash rule. If one or more of the items in a series has internal commas, a semicolon at the major boundaries is needed for clarity, as in a sentence by Forster:

(31) We read that the Franks built it in the thirteenth century and called it Misithras or Mistia; that it became the chief fortress in the Peloponnese during an uninteresting period; that it was taken from the Franks by the Byzantines, and from the Byzantines by the Turks; that it was governed by a long succession of tyrants whose lives were short and brutal.

If the interrupting material contains commas, there is need for a higher mark at the major boundaries, and the dash is appropriate because, unlike the semicolon, it can be used in pairs, as in a Lewis Thomas sentence:

(32) Although we are by all odds the most social of all social animals--more interdependent, more attached to each other, more inseparable in our behavior than bees--we do not often feel our conjoined intelligence.

I propose that the hierarchy and "raising" account for these rules systematically--if you know the system, you know how to do it--more effectively than the disconnected, unsystematized rules in handbooks.

Notice, finally, that "lowering"--the opposite of "raising"--is also a natural consequence of understanding the hierarchical system. The semicolon in most of its uses, the comma splice, and the avoidance of a comma with a coordinator

between independent clauses are examples of lowering. Raising seems to be required, in certain contexts, to satisfy the need for clarity (see (26), (31), (32)). Lowering, on the other hand, does not seem to be required by a contextual need for clarity, except in a more subtle sense of this need, as in a good comma splice (see E. B. White's punctuation of examples (34-35).

Multiple Independent Clauses

As discussed earlier, discourse consists of multiple independent clauses, and the good writer marks the junctures between them according to her or his intended meaning. In short, the problem is different from punctuating within the clause, but the answer is based on the same principle (clarity) and on the same knowledge (recognition of the boundaries of independent clauses).

There are, in fact, but two devices for marking the juncture between independent clauses: the hierarchy of punctuation marks and a set of coordinate conjunctions. See Table 1.

Table 1

Hierarachy	Coordinate conjunctions
period = maximum separation	and
semicolon = medium separation	but
colon = medium separation (anticipatory)	or
dash = medium separation	
comma = minimum separation	
zero = no separation (connection)	

I follow Quirk et al.(559) in omitting nor, for, so, yet from the list of coordinators; they recognize, of course, that these "impure" coordinators have some functions like those of and, but, and or, and when they are so used they will be so punctuated. (Note: then should be added to the list.) So this paper uses and, but, or in its examples, but suggests that the so-called "impure" coordinators, when used similarly, will be similarly punctuated.[4]

Let me emphasize that the above are the only devices for marking the juncture between independent clauses--in spite of what handbooks and style manuals tell us.[5] Writers use these devices to convey semantic intent, and as they use them, they use the differences inherent in each group as well as combinations among them (more numerous than the brief list suggests) to produce their intended semantic effects.

Punctuation Alone. Table 2 is a further representation of the hierarchy:

Table 2

Maximum:

I gravitated to the random. I swung with the non-sequential. -Joan Didion

I gravitated to the random; I swung with the non-sequential.

Medium:

Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three. - E. M. Forster

The fire is dying, the sparks scattering over the sand and stone--there is nothing to do but go. -Edward Abbey

And it is true that all of us write within traditions, we all have a history and a context. -Donald Murray

Minimum: { And it is true that all of us write within traditions we all have a history and a context.

The "meaning" of these markings ranges from maximum separation to no separation (connection)--but see the remarks on the dash and colon below. And since one purpose of punctuation is to achieve clarity, it is clear that, for ease of reading, the two marks of minimum separation between independent clauses are not as effective as the marks of medium or maximum separation. Zero, of course, is even confusing (and found only in experimental writing or certain kinds of poetry where, however, it is used for the very reasons indicated by the hierarchy--to show connection where, normally, separation would be shown). The comma splice, however, is an intentional mark in the writing of most "good" writers and, as indicated by the hierarchy, shows less of a separation than the higher marks--thus the purpose, an absolutely legitimate purpose, of the comma splice, as illustrated in another sentence by E. M. Forster (a fearless comma splicer):

(33) He could not stand the insecurities that are customary between officials, he refusesd to make use of the face-saving apparatus that they so liberally provide and employ.

There is a similar difference between the period and semicolon--the significance of the hierarchy, after all, is pretty straightforward. Look at the punctuation of some

words by E. B. White:

(34) The great days have faded. The end is in sight.

(35) The great days have faded; the end is in sight.

White actually used a comma splice here--so I have introduced a bit of deception in (34) and (35); it seems an opportunity to make two points at once.

The dash and the colon are similar in function and, sometimes, even in meaning (see all three tables): for example, which one would you propose for the following words by Virginia Woolf:

(36) We have not time to go far back (?) certainly we have not time to look closely.

Woolf chose the dash, as most of us would; I suggest, however, that some of us would use a colon to reflect an intended meaning.

The difference can be made still more clear by categorizing the marks according to basic purposes, giving a top two, middle two, and bottom two:

Table 3 --Basic Purposes

TOP:	To Separate independent clauses:	. ;
MIDDLE:	To Separate independent clauses or non-clausal units from independent clauses:	: --
BOTTOM:	To Separate non-clausal units from independent clauses:	, zero

The differences in Table 3 are general and basic; as the discussion of raising indicates, writers gain emphasis by

using an appropriate higher mark, a mark not limited to the next one up.

Coordination Alone. According to our handbooks, marking the juncture between independent clauses with a coordinator alone is not done--unless the clauses are short and clear:

(37) The hare slept and it lost the race.

But the purpose of an adequate theory of punctuation is to be (1) descriptive of what is done and (2) instructive in how it is done. Therefore we note that sentences like the following are not infrequently found in the nonfiction prose of good contemporary writers:

(38) Well--the sun will be up in a few minutes and I haven't even begun to make coffee. --Edward Abbey

(39) He told them very badly but you could see there was something there if he could get it out.-- Ernest Hemingway

(40) I could write a syndicated column for teenagers under the name "Debbie Lynn" or I could smuggle gold into India or I could become a $100 call girl, and none of it would matter. --Joan Didion

What, then, is the meaning signalled by coordinator alone? The answer lies in the function of punctuation marks--to mark a separation (or degree of connection, if you will).Thus, in the absence of a separating mark, as in (37)-(40), the signal is just that: as close a connection as the system allows.

Punctuation with Coordinator. What happens when we combine a mark with a coordinator is, I suggest, what the system predicts: more of a separation. A long sentence by Didion illustrates both coordinator alone and coordinator with punctuation:

(41) But after a while the signs thin out on Carnelian Avenue, and the houses are no longer the bright pastels of the Springtime Home owners but the faded bungalows of the people who grow a few grapes and keep a few chickens out here, and then the hill gets steeper and the road climbs and even the bungalows are few, and here--desolate, roughly surfaced, lined with eucalypatus and lemon groves--is Banyan Street.

One can see clearly, in that sentence, the difference between the two possibilties with independent clauses: coordinator plus comma creates greater separation, greater emphasis, than coordinator alone; the options provided by these devices are needed--and used by good writers. To oversimplify and suggest that one should use a comma whenever a coordinator is used between independent clauses--or not use one when the second clause is ellipted--is to falsify the description of written English and to misinform the student. As a matter of fact, we commonly enough find the "true" coordinators with any of the punctuation marks:

(42) ... I wish good fortune to both sides, good swill to all. Or conversely, depending on my mood of the moment, damn both houses and <u>pox vobiscum.</u> --Edward Abbey

(43) Find them, and clone them. But there is no end to the protocol. --Lewis Thomas

(44) Whether or not our old drainboard was a guardian of our health I will never know; but neither my wife nor I have enjoyed as good health since the back kitchen got renovated. --E. B. White

(45) Since then I have walked, and prefer walking to horseback riding--but I had forgotten the depth of feeling one could see in horses' eyes.--Alice Walker

(46) ...the job in Burma had given me some understanding of the nature of imperialism: but these experiences were not enough to give me an accurate political orientation. --George Orwell

Even more options are available with ellipsis in the second or third clause, the most common form of which is the ellipted subject; the "rule" tells us to punctuate as follows:

(47) This is called "anchoring the mall" and represents seminal work in shopping-center theory.

But the system allows options:

(48) This is called "anchoring the mall," and represents seminal work in shopping-center theory.

(49) This is called "anchoring the mall"--and represents seminal work in shopping-center theory.

(50) This is called "anchoring the mall": and represents seminal work in shopping-center theory.

Didion chose (48), but the other choices must be considered as "correct," and perhaps as reasonable as well. Sometimes a writer will even choose maximum separation:

(51) But all I could do was to try to rein him out of it. Or hug his back. --Alice Walker

(52) It is made; not described. --Ernest Hemingway

The ellipted independent clause in the following example by Updike could be punctuated with any mark but zero:

(53) (Doris Day's) third picture, strange to say, ended with her make-believe marriage to Errol Flynn. A heavenly match, in the realm where both are lovable.

Five more options were available for Updike if he considered the deleted It was. And with coordinator plus punctuation, there are--considering just and--six more. A total of sixteen options for a writer to consider.

Notice that (49)-(53) are in fact examples of "raising" and represent options that good writers know how to exploit. Notice also that teaching a "rule" actually denies the options, for a rule indicates--at least for students--only one way of doing something, the "right" way; the rule thus denies students the opportunity to learn an important writing strategy. Which raises the question of pedagogy.

Pedagogy

To punctute well one needs a litle knowledge--much less than most English teachers will grant--and a great deal of

practice. One needs to recognize an independent clause in one's writing, which requires bringing to a conscious level what one knows intuitively. All native speakers have what linguists call a "competence" that includes the ability to speak quite "correctly" in independent clauses; so students who are native speakers quickly enough master the consciousness-raising task of identifying subject and finite verb--unless the syntax is highly irregular--an ability which is reinforced by, and reinforcing of, an intuitive sense of completion. Students need knowledge of the syntactic locations where specific punctuation marks can be used, a knowledge consisting of four rules which are more-or-less known to anyone who reads at, say, an eighth grade level. Third, students need to know the hierarchical relationships among the marks. And finally students need to develop an appreciation of two principles: punctuating according to the need(s) of clarity and/or effectiveness and punctuating according to the nature of the hierarchy: the higher the mark, the greater the separation.

The term "clarity" is not a technical term. Writers who learn through their reading intuit a system that allows them to choose punctuation according to their need for clarity, just as they choose their words and their syntax; and students who learn in a pedagogical setting are encouraged by most teachers to develop a sense of clarity based on considerations for the reader and their own semantic intent.

An appealing aspect of this theory is that it allows for

individual differences in its application. The fifth- grader should use his/her knowledge of the hierarchy (which may be incomplete, of course) according to his/her intentions. Teachers should make it clear to the fifth-grader as well as to the thirteenth-grader that good writing aims to be clear; that is, a good writer chooses to do something (to choose a word, to begin a sentence adverbially, to punctuate). In choosing to do there is a positive, a constructive, approach to writing, for the student is creating meaning; in contrast, in obeying a rule, there comes a negative attitude, a negative approach, for the student is punctuating to avoid error rather than to create meaning.

The above, certainly, is not cognitively overwhelming, but a sophisticated sense of this knowledge just as certainly requires exposure to sophisticated examples (good reading) and thoughtful feedback (good teaching).

Learning theory, as I understand it, suggests that the above involves far easier learning tasks than those involved in learning a list of unordered rules with exceptions and footnotes and behavioristic responses to very uncertain stimuli (the student's own sentences).

Conclusion

The system presented here has, I claim, explanatory power in so far as it explains how good writers punctuate; they have learned, from their reading, the differences among a hierarchy of marks and acquired a sense of independent

clauses (single and compounded) that allows them to use the hierarchical notion along with a reader-sensitive notion of clarity to punctuate single independent clauses (one problem) and conjoined independent clauses (a second problem) according to their semantic intentions. No one learns to punctuate this way from schooling; so the claim is that good writing reveals an underlying system of punctuation to the thoughtful reader/writer.

Because it is principle- based (with four obvious rules), the system tolerates variations according to the writer's semantic intent (meaning)--that is, according to her or his determination of the needs for clarity.

The notion of semantic intent, which recognizes the wholly natural input of syntax, semantics, and prosody, is consistent with Chafe's studies of the relationships between prosody and punctuation. My conclusion, I believe, agrees with his: "...punctuation ... does capture some major aspects of a writer's prosodic intent .... a skillful author will use punctuation as a resource to enhance the effectiveness of his or her writing...." (397)

And this process approach is, it appears, complementary to the descriptive approach of Levinson. Her descriptions of the finished products simply require a theory that explains how the products are produced.

A long while ago in a long- neglected book, Summey told us what was wrong with style manuals and handbooks: "The notion that there is only one correct way of punctuating a

given word pattern is true only in limited degree. Skillful writers have learned that they must make alert and successful choices between periods and semicolons, semicolons and commas, and commas and dashes, dashes and parentheses, according to meaning and intended emphasis" (4).

The system accounts for both the early punctuation of Isak Dinesen (Out of Africa, 1938), which shows a non-native speaker unsure of the system, and the late (Shadows on the Grass, 1961) which shows her in control of the system. It accounts for the style of Joyce in Dubliners, which indicates that the comma after introductory material is rarely important. It accounts for Updike's conservative punctuation in nonfiction but liberal punctuation in fiction. Good style is not a matter of violating rules, it is a matter of choosing to "enhance" effectiveness, as Chafe put it.

Summary

Discourse consists of independent clauses (some with deleted elements), and we punctuate by marking the syntactic-prosodic-semantic relationships within the independent clause and between independent clauses according to principle 1, the need for clarity. More specifically, (a) to reveal the relationships between the "dependent" words and the "independent" clause and (b) to clarify the relationships between independent clauses. Within the independent clause, three punctuation patterns are possible:

Pattern 1: ... (pct?) subject + predicate.

Pattern 2: subject + predicate (pct?) ....

Pattern 3: subject (pct?) ... (pct?) predicate.
(Interruptions may occur elsewhere within the clause.)

Three rules specify the availability of the marks:

Rule 1: Pattern 1 permits zero, comma, or dash.

Rule 2: Pattern 2 permits any mark.

Rule 3: Pattern 3 permits paired zeroes, commas, dashes.

Principle 2 refers to the hierarchy (see table 1): The higher the mark the greater the separation, as indicated by variations on the sentence by White:

(54) The great days have faded. The end is in sight.

(55) The great days have faded; the end is in sight.

(56) The great days have faded: the end is in sight.

(57) The great days have faded--the end is in sight.

(58) The great days have faded, the end is in sight.

(59) The great days have faded the end is in sight.

And (59) reveals one more rule: zero between independent clauses is permitted only with a cooordinator.

Coordination alone is used to separate independent clauses (sentences (38)-(40)); with the optional combination of coordinator plus punctuation, emphasis on the separateness of the clauses is obtained, as promised by principle 2 (sentences (41)-(46)). And ellipsis creates even more options for the writer (sentences (44)-(50).

Raising is not a principle; it illustrates one function of the hierarchical principle: If an independent clause becomes overloaded with commas, a higher mark at a major

boundary produces more clarity. By raising, or lowering, writers gain, or minimize, normal syntactic emphasis.

The system purports to describe what "good" writers do and to tell others how to do it. By allowing options according to one's needs for clarity, it encourages careful analysis and rewriting--what good writers have learned to do.

NOTES

1. "Good" writers is in reference, generally, to nonfiction by writers of recognized stature, all found in college readers. Such writers are cited in the following pages. For more on this topic, see Dawkins.

2. I've been reading E. L. Doctorow's World's Fair, and the first few pages are enough to tell us that Doctorow would be given a bad time by most comp teachers.

3. This paper excludes parentheses from the "functional" marks. For one thing, parentheses, unlike any other mark, are limited to pairs; one might argue, furthermore, that parentheses are used for "non-text" information.

4. A fuller treatment will consider the paired conjunctions (correlatives); but they do not seem to complicate the picture.

5. Subordinate conjunctions do not join independent clauses; they form "dependent" elements (phrases or clauses), elements which function as the attachments in patterns I, II, and III--and are punctuated accordingly. Similarly, conjunctive adverbs are simply dependent words and phrasal words ("on the other hand") that function as the same kinds of attachments:

   --However, they played the next day. (pattern I)

   --They played the next day, however. (pattern II)

   --They played, however, the next day. (pattern III)

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